

There were professing believers in the Thessalonian church who were refusing to work, when they could work, and expecting others to provide their food. This was a situation which according to Paul required a biblically based church discipline. It was a process which he had already begun and now instructs the church to continue. It was and is counter-cultural. But by God's standards, discipline which brings a believer into conformity with God's will is a very loving thing to do. For that reason, the four characteristics of biblical church discipline, which can be seen in Paul's example with the Thessalonians, are important for us to understand and follow.

I. Biblical discipline is commanded by apostolic authority.

1. The example of apostle Paul establishes that there are times when discipline within the church is commanded (3:6, 14).

The command (v.6) is expressed having the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. All who acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ are obligated to obey this command. With different words the command is repeated (v.14), giving the letter itself the same apostolic authority. The church as a body was to publically indicate who was idle and disorderly and to all avoid close fellowship with him, especially as related to meals together.

2. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul was doing what Jesus instructed.

In Matthew 18:15–17 Jesus commanded a multi-step process for church discipline in which the whole church becomes involved, when there is no initial repentance. At times Jesus disciplined sinful members of His church directly (e.g., Acts 5:1–11; 1 Corinthians 11:29–30).

Because it is commanded, the Thessalonian believers would have been disobedient, if they did not discipline as Paul commanded. Similarly, obedience is required of the church today.

II. Biblical discipline is founded upon clear biblical teaching.

1. The sin mentioned in Matthew 18:15 requires a biblical definition.
2. The sinful behavior in Thessalonica had been taught against by Paul's own example (7–9), by precept (10), and by command (12). To refuse to work when you can, and instead live off others, is sin.
3. Other Scriptures teach also that those who rebel against divine truth should be disciplined.

Discipline may be needed for those who embrace unbiblical beliefs (e.g., Galatians 1:8; 2 John 7–10; Titus 3:10) and for those who rebel against biblical behavior (e.g., Matthew 18:15; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, esp. v.13; 1 Timothy 5:19–20).

Biblical discipline requires knowing what the Bible says, believing that it is true, and therefore being willing to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ and obey it.

III. Biblical discipline is carried out within a family relationship.

1. Addressing the entire church ("you", plural) and calling them "brothers" (v.6) indicated that the entire church as a family was expected to participate in the discipline of the disorderly idle.
2. Even the idle and disorderly are called brothers (v.6) and should not be treated as enemies (v.15). There is implied the desire to see this person restored and living in obedience to Jesus Christ.
3. Believers are to relate differently to one another than to the world. We are called to judge those within the church but not outside (1 Corinthians 5:9–13). The idea that we are not to judge fails to understand correctly such passages as Matthew 7:1–6.
4. Biblical church discipline in the NT assumes the importance of spiritual family life (cf. Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 11:17–34). There is only shame (2 Thess 3:14) when the relationship is important.

IV. Biblical discipline follows a due process.

1. Generally, though not absolutely, there is the following process which is largely revealed in Paul's actions with the Thessalonians.

(1) Affirm a Scriptural understanding. (2) Check your own life (Matthew 7:5). (3) Assure sufficient instruction and confront privately first (Matthew 18:15). If there is repentance, then rejoice, thank God, forgive, and be quiet about the sin. (4) If there is no repentance, return with one or two witnesses. (5) Without repentance, it becomes a matter for the entire church to hear (Matthew 18:17; cf. 1 Corinthians 4). Paul in 2 Thessalonians appears to give some time for social restrictions to have an effect before possibly insisting on strict excommunication.

2. This process has multiple purposes: the restoration of the brother or sister, the purity of the church, the testimony to the world, and the glory of God.

Believers should we willing to obey the command to discipline, equip themselves with Scripture to do it rightly, foster a family context to both avoid and strengthen discipline, and persevere in doing it right, from start to finish. God, as a loving heavenly Father, disciplines His own children (Hebrews 12) and has chosen to use the church as one of His tools. Judging ourselves and correcting one another avoids stronger discipline from the Lord.

Biblical discipline becomes a measure of our love for one another, a love that must be biblically defined. We can and should challenge one another, exercising biblical discipline when necessary, persevering for God's honor and glory, according to His infallible Word, and by His grace and strength.